



Feed the Future Country Fact Sheet

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Thanksgiving Inspiration: What One Peace Corps Volunteer in Guatemala Is Thankful for This Year



Peace Corps

Indira Martinez (far right), a Peace Corps Volunteer, working with youth in Guatemala.

Thanksgiving is, at its core, a celebration of abundance – the abundance of family, of joy, and, of course, food. Giving thanks for this bounty is a tradition that predates the United States and spans the globe in the form of harvest festivals. If all humans shared one trait, it would be the love of food and a desire to share it with those we care for. For this reason I have always had a great appreciation for Thanksgiving.

But while many families find themselves in a position of abundance this time of year, food insecurity and malnutrition endure amid today's plenty, with 795 million people still going to bed hungry every night.

This reality is abundantly clear to me as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Guatemala, where half of all children under 5 are chronically malnourished. It is disheartening to see children starve and crops shrivel. I have witnessed more hardship in the past year than ever before in my life and, because of this, I approach Thanksgiving this year with a keen awareness of my own privilege and opportunity to help bring about change in this beautiful country.

A feeling of gratitude has also grown in me as I approach this Thanksgiving. Here's why:

1. Despite growing up economically underprivileged, I never once went hungry.

I grew up with a single mom. When I was a child, she worked three jobs to make sure that my brother and I had everything that we needed. Every day, we went to school feeling happy and full. Despite the undeniable difficulties my family faced, we never once went hungry.

During my time in Guatemala, I've realized that my mother did not achieve this in isolation. Growing up in the United States,

my brother and I were afforded many opportunities that the Guatemalan students I now work with wouldn't know to miss: Affordable school lunch programs provided me and my brother with five meals a week. A higher standard of living meant that we had a refrigerator that kept our food fresh, relieving my mother of the burden of having to go grocery shopping every day, whereas in Guatemala, mothers have to be very strategic about their food selection, picking foods that keep well without refrigeration. There is no doubt my mother worked extremely hard to care for us, but the privilege of living in a developed society afforded us benefits unknown in other parts of our world.

2. My fellow volunteers are using their skills and creativity to combat food insecurity in Guatemala.

Thanksgiving in Spanish is "Día de Acción de Gracias," which translates to "The Day of Showing Gratitude through Action." My fellow Peace Corps Volunteers are putting their gratitude into action by working with local partners in Guatemala to combat hunger and poverty through agricultural development. Take for example my peer Nicole Mortenson, who helped mothers of malnourished children in her community start home gardens that are increasing their families' access to fresh, nutrient-dense foods that their children need to grow and thrive.

In small communities like this across Guatemala, Peace Corps Volunteers are planting the seeds of change, one family at a time.

3. The Guatemalan people serve as a force for change in their own communities.

Astrid Calel Velásquez is something of a hero in Uspantán, El Quiché. An employee of the Guatemalan government's Secretary of Food and Nutritional Security, Astrid spends her days coordinating food security efforts in her municipality to ensure that "no child in Uspantán dies of undernutrition."

She works on a Guatemalan government initiative called "Pacto Hambre Cero," or the Zero Hunger Pact, which the United States supports through its [Feed the Future](#) initiative.

By bringing together the representatives of nonprofits, government agencies, and community organizations that work on food security issues, Astrid and her team facilitate action that creates tangible change.

But coordination is just the beginning. Astrid also works on a number of grassroots level initiatives to ensure that the work done in those meetings actually reaches the people who need it the most. From educating pregnant mothers on the needs of their changing bodies to working in the local hospital to monitor health services, Astrid is involved in every facet of her community's food security network. She even visits the homes of malnourished children to promote health at the most basic level – the family. With women like Astrid leading the charge, countries like Guatemala will not remain disenfranchised for long.

Of all the things I'm grateful for this Thanksgiving, this is what inspires me the most – the passion of ordinary people like Nicole and Astrid, working together to create extraordinary change.

Indira Martinez is a Youth Development Volunteer with the Peace Corps in Guatemala, where she works on projects that support the Feed the Future initiative. Last year, Peace Corps programs reached 38,257 farmers with improved technologies or management practices and provided more than 47,000 individuals with short-term agricultural training worldwide.